



JOHN KITCHEN

## ***"City of organs" welcomes the restoration of an heroic instrument***

On Saturday 7 June 2003 the grand organ in the Usher Hall was publicly heard for the first time in many years when the internationally-renowned concert organist Dame Gillian Weir gave a masterly solo recital to a very full house. The following Saturday the organ was again heard, this time with full orchestra, in a performance of Saint-Saëns's popular 'Organ Symphony' played by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra with myself at the organ. Since then, this heroic instrument has gradually been integrated once again into the musical life of the Hall and of the city of Edinburgh.



*Left and below: The organ pipes and decorative cherub.*



This organ was originally built by the firm of Norman and Beard in 1914 at a cost of approximately £4000, and was much used for many years in a variety of roles. It was designed in conjunction with Dr Thomas Collinson, organist at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral from 1878 to 1928. Interestingly, Collinson's name also features in correspondence about the McEwan Hall organ after its installation in 1897; he seems to have acted both as University and City Organist, although I have no evidence indicating that these posts were official. By the 1970s the Usher Hall instrument was beginning to prove unreliable, and over the next 20 years it gradually

fell into disuse largely as a result of poor humidity and temperature control in the Hall. Despite the valiant efforts of those then responsible for the care of the organ, it became totally unreliable and unusable, and was then silent for many years. Readers may remember an Edinburgh International Festival performance of Berlioz's *Te Deum*, when the important organ part was played by Gillian Weir on the organ of St Mary's Cathedral, the sound being relayed to the Usher Hall and played through large speakers. Although an impressive technical achievement, it was a disgrace that such a thing had to be done. For other concerts electronic simulations were used, with predictably ghastly results.

We are only too well aware that, throughout the country, many fine Victorian and Edwardian buildings were either demolished or fell into disrepair from the 1960s onwards; they were widely (though by no means universally) considered to be hopelessly unfashionable. Something not dissimilar happened in the organ world, which boasts a bewildering array of different types of instrument, of which we are fortunate to have many fine examples in Edinburgh. From about the 1960s to the 80s there was a fashion for the 'neo-classical' style of organ, which attempted to return to 18<sup>th</sup>-century styles and sounds, (sometimes misrepresented and not fully understood). Nevertheless, some wonderful new organs in this style were built (one of the most celebrated being that in our Reid Concert Hall) and some older organs were altered (and sometimes ruined) in accordance with these ideas. Along with all this went an inevitable criticism of large, opulent Romantic-style instruments, such as that in the Usher Hall. Some felt that such instruments had no future and that complete remodelling or total replacement were the only possible options. For a period, therefore, the 1914 Norman and Beard did not stand a chance: it malfunctioned and was considered outmoded. In more recent years, there has been a growing feeling that good

instruments (and buildings) of all periods have their own respective merits.



*A close-up view of the magnificent pipes.*

When a team from the British Institute of Organ Studies examined the Usher Hall organ in 1990 they were hugely impressed by what they found. Parts of it were persuaded to work on that occasion (at which I was present), and we were able to hear at least something of

its rich, orchestral tones and very impressive they were.

A thorough examination of the pipework and other aspects of its innards persuaded all concerned that a full restoration was justified. Much local interest was aroused, largely due to the sterling efforts of the Edinburgh musician Lindsay Sinclair who knew the organ well. The Usher Hall Organ Trust was formed, and successive Lord Provosts, in particular Eleanor McLaughlin, Norman Irons and Eric Milligan, were very supportive. The organist David Sanger was appointed consultant, and the contract for restoration was awarded to Harrison and Harrison of Durham, who are very experienced in restorations of this type of organ. Heritage lottery funding was secured for the work, which was to cost £585,000, but delays ensued since there was no money for increasingly necessary work on the fabric of the Hall itself. Any such operation, generating much dirt and dust as it is bound to, obviously had to precede work on the organ. Things were precipitated in 1997 when part of the ceiling fell down, and the Hall had to be closed on health and safety grounds. The City Council was forced to find funds for the Hall's refurbishment, and the first phase was begun in 1999.

In 2000 the organ was dismantled and almost all of it, except for the very large case-pipes which are on view, was taken to Harrison's workshop at Durham. This large instrument has a massive and very heavy console, with four manuals, pedals and numerous stops and other controls; there are 3,883 pipes in all; huge air reservoirs and

motors; masses of lead tubing which are part of the action (that is, the link between the player's pressing of the key and the opening of the pallet valve which allows the air into the particular pipe); a bewildering array of electrical components; swell-boxes, framework and much more. This organ has undergone no alteration of any kind during its lifetime, and the decision was made not to alter its sound in any way in fact, heritage lottery funding is generally granted for such work only on condition that conservation is as rigorous as possible. In the 1940s the organ had cinema-organ-style percussions added what in the trade are called 'traps' and these have now been removed since they did not form part of the original conception. (The original 24-note carillon is still present, however.) Some extra controls for the management of the stops have been discreetly added, but the sound is now as Thomas Collinson must have experienced it in 1914. It is rich, orchestral and opulent with exceptionally full diapason tone, fiery reeds, a plethora of beautiful flutes, keen strings and many other delights. Although the full ensemble is commanding and majestic, the endless variety of softer tone-qualities must not be overlooked. When confronted with a big organ like this most people think immediately of loud sounds (and most organists want to make them); but of course there is a huge dynamic range, and many of the quieter registers are especially unusual and attractive.

In December 2002 I was appointed to the newly-created post of City Organist, with duties at the Usher Hall which are both curatorial and promotional. Having undertaken such a massive and expensive restoration, it is essential that the instrument is properly cared for and that atmospheric conditions in the Hall are properly controlled and monitored. We are also keen that the organ is used as widely as possible, both as a solo instrument and in accompanying roles with choirs, orchestras and so on. Already many events are planned, and we hope that the scope of these will increase in the years to come. Edinburgh, now widely recognised as a 'city of organs', has yet another fine instrument in prime condition.

[Hear the Usher Hall organ played by John Kitchen in its debut disc appearance with Delphian on DCD 34022. See the inside back cover of this issue for a **special offer** for *Soundboard* readers.]

*Photographs of the Usher Hall organ: Paul Baxter*